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"I Don't Want You Sitting Next to Me": The Macro, Meso, and Micro of Gaining and Maintaining Access to Government Organizations During Ethnographic Fieldwork

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Abstract

The challenges of access in ethnographic research are well-documented in methodological literature, but poorly described in many empirical studies. To date, very little research has focused on access to organizations. In this article, I describe the ongoing access challenges in a period of fieldwork in UK Jobcentre Plus (welfare) offices. Access was granted in four phases: organizational access at a national level (macro), access to individual offices (meso), access to advisors as interview subjects (very limited micro), and finally access to shadow one welfare advisor (limited micro). However, access to observe multiple advisors (full micro) did not occur. In this article, I draw on field notes and interview extracts from advisors as one source of ethnographic data and compare these to data generated in interviews with benefit claimants who were recruited from charities and interviewed away from Jobcentre Plus offices. Differences were found between these two data sources, which highlight that access arrangements impacted on the data collected. Researchers should acknowledge and reflect upon access arrangements at the macro-, meso-, and microlevel in the presentation of ethnographic research findings.

Keywords

access, negotiating access, ethnography, emotional labor, reflexivity, qualitative methods, qualitative research, fieldwork, field sites, social justice

What is already known?

Negotiating access to the field for qualitative research is challenging. These challenges do not stop when official access is granted. In order to maintain access relationships in the field, researchers need to perform identity work. Identity work may focus on insider and outsider status (including sexuality, nationality ethnicity, links to communities), appearance, and the type of research undertaken.

What this paper adds?

A new framework is provided by this paper which considers access negotiations in organizations as occurring at three distinct and separate levels: (1) macro—official access from senior managers (director), (2) meso—access to a particular field site from senior staff (managers), and (3) micro—agreement from ground-level individuals that the researcher can be present during their everyday activities. Within the study presented, the highest level of access was not gained. Complementary evidence from interviews outside of this research field highlighted that the challenges of access in this site had a real impact on the data produced.

> The ways in which one enters and remains in a field setting reflect the research setting as much as they do the research itself.
>
> Bondy (2013, p. 586)

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When research design and methodology is discussed in empirical papers, access to field sites is often underdescribed, giving the impression that access was unproblematic. However, in the methodological literature, the challenges of maintaining access are regularly noted (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, & Lofland, 2001; Blix & Wettergren, 2015; Bondy, 2013; Feldman, Bell, & Berger, 2003; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Molloy, 2015; Schlosser, 2008; Wagle & Cantaffa, 2008). When attempting to recruit individuals, a lack of researcher preparedness for the challenges of gaining access to the field can be a major issue (Feldman et al., 2003). This may include communication that request too much too soon from participants (Wolf, 1991). Alongside this, a range of additional hurdles may need to be overcome when undertaking research within organizations. For Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), access challenges are often at their most intense during the period of negotiation and during the early days. They suggest a "practical" approach which "itself provides insights into the social organization of the setting" (p. 41). However, access (and securing truly informed consent) is not a one-off event during extended periods of fieldwork (Blix & Wettergren, 2015). It may be that certain elements of the organization are permitted to be observed, while others are not, and this is not necessarily linked to the researcher's perception of the sensitivity of the topic (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). In my reading of the methodological literature, it felt as though two elements were being described: gaining official access and then maintaining it within the field. These two elements are described below.

Gaining Access

Traditional attempts at describing the ongoing challenges of access have a strong focus on a central "gatekeeper" figure (Whyte, 1943). In research in which levels of power are unevenly distributed, this may still be appropriate. For example, in Rashid's (2007) research in urban slums in Bangladesh, where gang leaders and landlords played a dominant role in the lives of residents, Rashid had to undertake "constant negotiations with gatekeepers at community and individual levels to be able to conduct interviews" (p. 371). During her initial discussion with senior slum leaders, she was told that she would only be granted access to study women's health and that it would be dangerous for her to study other areas.

Not all field access relationships involve an all-powerful central gatekeeper (or gatekeepers), and if researchers focus heavily on these, they may neglect the role of the researcher, other individuals, and events encountered within the field (Bondy, 2013). In order to secure access to some fields, researchers may be required to demonstrate a shared identity, or at least a noncontrasting identity, with the group under study, including in relation to gender, ethnicity, nationality, and sexuality (Brown-Saracino, 2014; Wagle & Cantaffa, 2008). This may involve identity work on the part of researchers, to assimilate a shared identity (where it exists), but also work to distance oneself from misunderstandings regarding a shared identity when it is not present but may be imagined (Wagle & Cantaffa, 2008). Establishing a shared identity may be challenging for researchers who are not native to the country under study, where levels of social capital may be reduced, and some researchers have responded to this by downplaying their nonnative status (Alcadipani, Westwood, & Rosa, 2015). The researchers' status in relation to the group as inside (Mannay, 2011), or outside (Bondy, 2013), of a group may also affect their access to the field. Alongside this, access relations in ethnographic research are likely to be particularly problematic for "hard to reach" groups, including marginalized young people (Bengry-Howell & Griffin, 2011), and researchers should navigate ways of reducing the power imbalance in such ethnographic encounters (Warming, 2011). A second hard to reach group is high status groups, and research on interviewing elites suggests that access is also likely to be difficult to those in positions of power (Conti & O'Neil, 2007). Therefore, organizations that are powerful may be challenging to undertake ethnography within (Gaztambide-Fernandez & Howard, 2012).

Maintaining Access

When researchers have entered the field, they must continue to manage access relations as they meet and interact with participants. In order to maintain access within organizations, researchers should conform to a shared understanding of acceptable behavior (Bondy, 2013) and attire (Delamont, 2002), which may vary between different groups within the study site. Consideration of how much of one's own views (if any) should be shared with participants should also be undertaken (Molloy, 2015). Researchers may find that they must not talk about certain topics that are central to the research (Bondy, 2013; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), but instead gain an understanding of that phenomena over time. Alongside this, to fit into the site in a way that minimizes suspicion, ethnographers may need to participate in institutional gossip (Carmel, 2011) or find other ways to display their social capital with the group under study.

When studying members of organizations who are working with limited opportunities for discretion within their role, for example, because they must meet organizational targets (Duke, 2002), researchers may also seek to demonstrate their understanding of these constraints, including not being able to provide optimal service to users of the organization, while in the field to build field relations. While these negotiations may occur without any explicit discussion occurring between the researcher and the gatekeepers or participants (Feldman et al., 2003), the researcher's experience of these events should be considered an essential part of how access to the field is described, and what this means for the data collected (Coffey, 1999).

Emotion work can be defined as "a necessary skill required in the building of successful rapport with the research subjects in qualitative research" (Blix & Wettergren, 2015, p. 689). Not only does the researcher need to manage their own behavior in generating rapport, where participants disclose views that the researcher has an emotional response to, it is often stated that

she must perform emotion work, through displaying appropriately neutral emotions and an "objective" stance, in order to maintain field access. This is particularly relevant when access feels less than secure, for example, when the group understudy are hard to reach (Blee, 1998; Hudson, 2013).

In performing the role of the dispassionate, professional researcher, emotional responses may be portrayed that are toned down or even entirely inaccurate (Carroll, 2012). Following the research encounter, the researcher should consider these emotional responses, in order to make sense of the phenomena observed and their own position as an actor within it (Stodulka, 2015). Research with qualitative researchers has highlighted that researchers undertake significant emotion work both within the field and during periods of reflection (Dickinson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2009). Among respondents, emotional responses included feeling sad, being upset, crying, and physiological changes, particularly when a sensitive subject was being discussed. Some researchers noted that they attempted to present a neutral self, while others did not. Within ethnographic work, researcher neutrality in the field is often aspired to, although it has been noted that this is not always appropriate or possible (Stodulka, 2015).

The Research Study

The data presented in this article are drawn from a wider research project (Grant, 2011a) which explored how welfare reform was experienced among those living in deprived communities (Grant, 2011b; Grant, 2012) and the staff working with them (Grant, 2013a, 2013b). The research largely focused on how the UK Welfare Reform Act 2007 was implemented, with a particular focus on the Pathways to Work program. The program required Incapacity Benefit (welfare) claimants to attend "Work Focused Interviews" in Jobcentre Plus (welfare) offices in which they were "offered" optional return to work support. Failure to attend resulted in benefit sanctions. However, research found that claimants often took part in the "optional" support because they did not know that it was not compulsory (Nice, Irvine, & Sainsbury, 2009).

Notions of acceptable behavior vary over time (Hacking, 1986), and in the decade proceeding the research, a change in the acceptability of long-term sickness benefits had begun (Bambra & Smith, 2010). The political landscape at this time represented a tension; discourses of empowerment for those who had previously been "excluded" from the labor market were presented alongside reports of fraudulent and inappropriate claims, based on individual failings or a culture of worklessness (see, e.g., Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, 2005). These discourses of individual failings were also commonly found in the media, who largely neglected stories of "deserving" claimants and suggested that incapacity benefit claimants, in the main, were an undesirable "other" who were undertaking deviant acts (Katz, 1987). The other in this case was part of an "underclass" (Field, 1999) who did not conform to norms as a "citizen" would be expected to (Dean, 1999). This led to the suggestion that something must be done, by politicians and the media alike, which led to public concern and preoccupation with the idea of benefit cheats (Cohen, 2002). Furthermore, the resources to implement Pathways to Work were lower than required, which necessitated advisors prioritizing some claimants over others, as is often the case with front line government workers (Lipsky, 2010). It is within this context that Jobcentre Plus advisors sat during the period of data collection.

In order to understand the subjective experiences of this policy change, an ethnographic study was undertaken with an interpretivist epistemological underpinning. Data sources included observation in Jobcentre Plus offices (32 hr), interviews with a range of stakeholders ($n = 42$), and documentary analysis (10 patient case files). While observing in Jobcentre Plus offices, I sat at the advisors' desk with them and wrote field notes using a notebook and pen, both during work-focused interviews with benefit claimants and ethnographic interviews with the advisor. At the beginning of the data collection period, I wrote notes as discretely as possible; however, this changed as I found that the advisor was still forthcoming when I was writing notes, which is often a natural progression in ethnographic data collection (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). I was unable to write everything that I desired during some busy periods of activity, so when the advisor was typing up their own notes or making telephone calls, I was able to expand on areas in the field notes that I had not fully recorded previously whilst still in the field. Alongside this, when the advisor was free to talk, I undertook ethnographic interviewing, asking her to explain things that were not obvious from observation alone, and I also recorded these conversations in my field notes. Upon leaving the field each day, I expanded on these notes within 24 hr, to add additional detail and my analytical reflections. I then typed up my handwritten notes.

The majority of participants in the study took part in a semi-structured interview, using a topic guide as a brief aide memoire to ensure that each element of the *Pathways to Work* intervention was discussed. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Within the analysis process, I was aware that the data resulting from fieldwork were based on my own interpretation of the way that events unfolded (Sanjek, 1990) and that these could not be considered comparable to interview transcripts. Despite this, as the analysis aimed to produce as accurate a picture of the policy change as possible, all data were analyzed together with differences within and between sources noted. Data were analyzed within Atlas.ti using interpretative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a piece of policy analysis, there was not a theoretical stance running through the analysis, but transitions from work to incapacity and subjective identity were highlighted as core themes.

The study was granted ethical approval by the National Health Service (NHS) Research Ethics Service (reference number: 08/MRE09/28). In this article, I draw on extracts from field notes and interviews with welfare advisors in order to illustrate the challenges of accessing government organizations. In doing so, I focus on stages of access, at the macro-, meso-, and micro-level, teasing out barriers to access, anticlaimant sentiment and

identity, and emotional work at each stage. In order to maintain anonymity among a small sample of gatekeepers and advisors, all subjects from the ethnographic field are referred to as female.

Access Negotiations at the Macro, Meso, and Micro to a Collection of UK Jobcentre Plus (Welfare) Offices

In this section, a description of the access journey is provided, alongside reflection on the factors that impacted this. Within social science research, we often study society within hierarchical levels of analysis, and I build on the literature review to consider the hierarchies of access encountered. One such typology which is well suited to studying policy change is a focus on macro-, meso-, and microlevel (Caldwell & Mays, 2012). Access negotiations within this study are described in three phases. First, macro, the highest level of concern within a society. In the case of Jobcentre Plus, this was at the most senior levels of management, where the power to agree or disagree to my research could be made on the basis of perceived risk to the organization as a whole as well as potential inconvenience. Second, once macroaccess was agreed, access was negotiated with local managers in individual offices, where the macro-level managers had devolved power to restrict my access because of local management concerns. The third and final stage, once macroaccess was agreed, was the practice of recruiting individuals, or microlevel actors, by providing participant information sheets by e-mail in advance, and a combination of strategies to increase the likelihood of access alongside informed consent forms. At each stage, access relations were related to different interests, which were tied to the actors involved and micro (the concerns of individual actors). Core challenges and potential solutions at each phase are presented in Table 1; references to existing literature are provided where available.

Macro

Early in the research development process, it became obvious that access to Jobcentre Plus offices would be an essential component in answering the research question. That was, to understand how the Welfare Reform Act 2007 was delivered, by Jobcentre Plus advisors and NHS staff, and experienced by benefit claimants. At this stage, the major challenge I encountered was that of being largely invisible to those who needed to approve the research. For example, my supervisor provided me with the e-mail address for a member of the Jobcentre Plus senior management team, with whom they had a good working relationship. I e-mailed the senior manager a brief project description, attaching the participant information sheet, and the names of senior members of staff at the university who were supportive of the project. As is good practice when attempting to secure access at the macrolevel, I ended the e-mail saying that I would follow up with a telephone call if I had not received a responses by the following week, to provide an opening for an ongoing attempt to secure a response. The e-mail did not elicit a response, and the follow-up telephone call did not result in an opportunity to talk to the director. I followed this up with further e-mail and telephone contact which was also unsuccessful.

In order to make myself, and this research project, visible in the macrophase, the use of a gatekeeper was necessary. As such, my supervisor, who knew the director, contacted her directly, and the director's secretary contacted me to offer a meeting. Having the support of a personal contact who was trusted by the director was essential in securing access. However, this is not to discount the importance of my initial approaches which contained all of the necessary information for the study to be judged as credible, including noting that the study had been funded through a competitive process and that ethical approval had been obtained. It may also be that my approaches, as a native of the country, were considered to be culturally appropriate and gave me "insider" status which has been found to be important within ethnographic research (Kanuha, 2000).

Within access negotiations, researchers should be well prepared to defend all aspects of their study at all times and should have all necessary documents available during attempts at contact. During the macrostage, the researcher has limited power over attempts to secure access. For example, during the meeting that was arranged to discuss the project with the director, I arrived to find a panel of three directors, and was subjected to detailed questioning about the research questions, likely dissemination and potential impacts. During the meeting, I presented hard copies of the participant information sheet and ethical approvals (institutional and National Research Ethics Service) and outlined the purpose of the research. This approach of producing official documentation which outlined the research enabled me to reassure the directors regarding some of their concerns and enhanced my credibility. Researchers may also consider what they can offer the organization, in order to bolster support at the macrolevel. In this instance, in exchange for the access agreements, I was asked to write a report for the organization, to which I readily agreed. The director then agreed to facilitate interviews with staff but did not agree to facilitate observations.

During access negotiations, researchers may choose to focus on access to one aspect of the field at first, in order to "get a foot in the door" and begin developing rapport and displaying a shared social capital with staff at the microlevel of the organization. Accordingly, I began my study without support for observations, which allowed the possibility of observation access being negotiated on the ground, at the meso- and microlevel, rather than applying pressure at the macrophase, which I felt may have resulted in having agreement for observations removed entirely.

Official statements in support of the research may not always result in access on the ground, and the researcher may need to continue their attempts to maintain contact with senior staff; always fitting in with local conventions on acceptable behavior. Within this project, the director who had agreed to

Table 1. Potential Access Challenges and Solutions at the Macro, Meso, and Micro Phases.

Phase	Challenge	Potential Solutions
All	Impartiality	Researchers should acknowledge their links with the organization, and their relationships with key actors at all stages (Coffey, 2009)
	Acceptability to multiple groups	Researchers may need to present alternative versions of themselves at different stages of the access journey (Delamont, 2002). Researchers should ensure that this is carefully managed, to not appear disingenuous.
Macro	Visibility	If repeated attempts to access the field are unsuccessful, make use of gatekeepers where possible.
	Credibility	Ensure that a professional approach is adopted at all times, including appropriate attire (Delamont, 2002). Be prepared to answer questions at any time (Feldman, Bell, & Berger, 2003).
	Likeability. At this level, directors often have little to gain in helping researchers.	Researchers should be polite and friendly, despite any delays to their research, this includes administrative staff who will play a crucial role in delivering messages to macrolevel staff. Researchers should consider what they can offer to the organization, for example, writing a report.
	Low status within access discussions; ongoing negotiations and potential removal of access during fieldwork (Rashid, 2007)	In order to gain access, researchers may need to agree to access rights which were lower than originally hoped, and regularly discuss progress with senior staff. Researchers should ensure that adequate time is factored into study protocols to enable delays at this stage.
	Directors' view of the researchers suitability to study the particular population based on demographics (gender, race, nationality, sexuality) or perceived vulnerability (e.g., young people or powerful elites)	Researchers may play up elements of their identity, but should also correct misassumptions that may later be problematic (Wagle & Cantaffa, 2008). Nonnative researchers should understand local customs regarding appropriate behavior in organizations (Alcadipani, Westwood, & Rosa, 2015) If a group is considered vulnerable, researchers may attempt to reduce the power imbalance during data collection (Bengry-Howell & Griffin, 2011; Warming, 2011)
	Directors' view of the researchers suitability to study the particular issue (insider or outsider; Bondy, 2013; Mannay, 2011)	Outsiders to the organization can reduce suspicion by having evidence of necessary approvals and institutional support available, and by offering to provide regular reports or feedback (while protecting the anonymity of participants)
Meso	The research may appear to be sponsored by senior management	Where possible, researchers should seek to speak to local managers themselves, and have copies of all relevant documents and approvals available If macrolevel individuals are performing a gatekeeper role, researchers should provide documentation that can be forwarded to local managers. Researchers should describe their research (including its purpose) in a way that is appropriate for a local manager, which may be different to a director Researchers may need to alter their attire in line with conventions for local managers (Delamont, 2002)
	Local managers may want to install different access levels to that agreed with directors due to perceived sensitivity (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007)	Where a lower level of access is offered, researchers could agree to this and try to renegotiate later. The support of local managers is crucial to success, and researchers should proceed carefully in these negotiations. Researchers may receive requests to show extracts of field data, and should be prepared to respond to these (Grant, Jacob, Moriarty, Lloyd & Allen (2016)).

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Phase	Challenge	Potential Solutions
Micro	Seeking too much information from participants in the early stages of fieldwork (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Wolf, 1991). This may be perceived as a threat to the participant or organization.	During the early days, researchers should observe routine practice, and focus on generating rapport (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Insights from "the waiting field" can be highly valuable (Mannay & Morgan, 2014) Contentious or difficult questions should not be asked until access is more secure; it may never be appropriate to ask some questions that are of interest to the study and researchers may gain understanding of the issue through observation alone (Bondy, 2013). Researchers should pay attention to body language from participants, to ensure that their questions are being positively received
	Ensuring that consent is truly informed (Blix & Wettergren, 2015)	During ethnographic fieldwork, consenting an individual cannot be a one-off event, tied only to a consent form. Researchers should informally check that participants feel comfortable with the researcher being present, and be prepared to leave spaces when it appears appropriate to maintain good relationships, as well as ethically comfortable research.
	Being an "outsider"	Researchers should consider appropriate attire (Delamont, 2002) Researchers may participate in off topic conversations, and even (with caution) local gossip, to be seen as part of the team (Carmel, 2011). Researchers may choose not to share their own views which contrast to dominant discourse in the setting (Molloy, 2015) Researchers may perform "emotion work" to present a neutral response to comments or activities that they find emotive (Blix & Wettergren, 2015). If this approach is taken, researchers should reflect on their emotional response (Coffey, 2009; Stodulka, 2015)
	Viewing behavior that may be embarrassing for participants	Junior staff in an organization may need to meet particular targets or follow policies that they do not personally agree with. If this occurs, researchers may empathize with participants to reduce potential embarrassment in order to build rapport (Duke, 2002) Researchers may choose not to record elements of "off topic" conversation which are of limited value in answering research questions and may be embarrassing to participants.
	Recording data in the field	This may initially serve to reinforce the researcher's outsider status, so may need to be undertaken discretely in the early days, with note-taking occurring in a more overt way when the researcher feels accepted (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011)
	Being a burden to key informants	Participants should aim to identify participant fatigue from ethnographic shadowing or interviewing, and offer to undertake a less burdensome activity.
	Giving something back	Beyond the early days in the field, where natural opportunities are presented when the researcher can be helpful in a small way, these may be undertaken. For example, making drinks during a break period.

facilitate access changed roles within the organization and was no longer in a position to directly support the research. The director e-mailed four members of senior staff who she asked to facilitate access to local offices or advisors, all of whom were unable to facilitate access, with one stating that she had a concern that she would "tread on toes" if she did so. Eventually, 11 months after access negotiations began, a new member of the senior management team became my gatekeeper, and facilitated mesoaccess, which will be described in the next section.

Access relationships may not always be linear, and it may or may not be appropriate to accept offers of access without macrolevel permissions. While I had begun my quest for access at the macrolevel, I was simultaneously offered unofficial microlevel access in a neighboring city, which was not part of the original study site. Although this offer would potentially have provided access on the ground, it was not pursued for several reasons. First, the volatile political context meant that if the study did not have macrolevel permissions, it was

vulnerable to being shut down at some point in the future, including the requirement for all data collected not to be used. Second, it was outside of the study site, where access to NHS providers of support services to claimants were offered. It was felt that access to these services would be more challenging to secure in a new site, and the aim was to create a rounded case study (Yin, 2013).

Meso

Within the meso phase, support of managers of local offices is crucial. In this instance, the new director and her secretary performed a gatekeeper role to attempt to open access at the mesolevel, and this took place over several weeks, with me maintaining an ongoing conversation with the director's secretary. As may occur in macro- and mesolevel access relations, I was not party to much of the communication that was undertaken by the gatekeepers, and thus I am unable to document this or consider its potential impacts on the data collected. One way in which researchers can partially mitigate for this is in providing accessible written guidance which may then be forwarded to potential participants.

Micro: Very Limited

Although I propose a three part typology of access arrangements, I have subdivided the on-the-ground fieldwork into two periods: "very limited" where I had access to interview advisors only and "limited" where I had access to shadow one advisor. This is in recognition of the ongoing challenges of access within the microfield within this study.

Twelve months after my first e-mail to the director, I received an e-mail from one advisor saying that four advisors in her area were willing to take part in interviews and that I could conduct all of these interviews in one afternoon when they would all be in the same office. I e-mailed a copy of the participant information sheet and wrote that if the participants had any questions or concerns, they could e-mail or telephone me prior to the interview date. The most experienced advisor, who had been undertaking the advisor role for 35 years, took part in an interview first, signing the consent form and agreeing that her answers could be audio recorded, as all of the interviewees did. Her answers were carefully constructed, with lots of pauses. In general, I felt that these advisors were trying hard not to say the "wrong" thing. In terms of "micro"access to the field I was, "getting by," gaining a narrow account, rather than accessing the entire field (Molloy, 2015). At this stage, I sought further interview participants, rather than trying to get access to shadow advisors, as I felt that the access agreement was far too precarious to consider any kind of escalation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Researchers will need to carefully consider their position within the field, being reflexive about their level of acceptance from microlevel staff, ahead of any attempts to escalate access.

Despite not having permission to shadow advisors at this time, I was gaining useful insight from "the waiting field" (Mannay & Morgan, 2014). Alongside this, in my routine interactions with advisors, as they were making us cups of tea and we were "having a chat," I was building rapport. There informal conversations may have been easier for me to navigate for several reasons. First, demographically, as a White, British female, I shared an ethnicity, nationality, and gender with the majority of advisors. Accordingly, it was easy for me to find common ground in conversations, for example, discussing the schooling system that advisors' children were involved in, where to shop for particular items and what had been on television the previous evening. Alongside rapport building, I was gaining knowledge of the cultural context of the Jobcentre, which was new to me, and the ways in which I should navigate this.

After the first few visits, during which I had been careful not to ask too many challenging questions, I found I had started to become accepted, and felt that I was viewed with less suspicion. The advisors aware that the study site was some distance from my home, suggested that I could "Pop in and say hello, if you're in this neck of the woods." This was an offer I took up when I was undertaking fieldwork in other sites, even when I was a significant distance away, in order to build relationships. Furthermore, I would often organize my interviews with claimants around having time to "pop in" and eat my lunch alongside the advisors in the staff room, ensuring that I always did more than my fair share of making drinks, and occasionally bringing a small gift—a cake or some biscuits—for the advisors. Where access is precarious and organizational staff provide an offer of an opportunity that may generate additional rapport, researchers should accept this if at all possible.

Micro: Limited

As previously mentioned, a core element of the research project was undertaking observations of work-focused interviews within Jobcentre Plus offices. When the potential of access is offered, researchers must be immediately able to respond, being prepared with all necessary paperwork (e.g., a notebook, Dictaphone, spare batteries, pens, consent forms, participant information forms, copies of all letters showing official permission to be present in the field). I received an initial offer to shadow an advisor, although this was later retracted as the "right" type of claimant would not be visiting on that day. A second advisor suggested that I should observe an advisor but joked that I should find another advisor: "because I don't want you sitting next to me." During this interview, I undertook emotion work, ignoring statements that I found distasteful as I hoped that I would secure access through the advisor. This approach was successful, and the advisor organized for me to shadow a third advisor.

I shadowed the advisor for 4 days over a period of 4 weeks, observing work-focused interviews with 12 incapacity benefit claimants with various health conditions and personal circumstances, and observing many more telephone conversations and informal interactions (see Grant, 2013b for more details). While I was observing, the advisor often attempted to find extra

money or support opportunities for claimants. The advisor was very open while being shadowed and became my key informant; she explained each claimant's history to me prior to them arriving by talking me through their entire electronic claimant file before they arrived. This detailed history was invaluable in understanding the context of each interview. Researchers should consider the burden that they are placing on participants. After 3 days of shadowing her, I felt that the advisor was beginning to become fatigued by this extra work of explaining things to me in her (already busy) day. I asked if she knew of any other advisors who might let me shadow them. She asked four advisors, two that she felt had particularly interesting claimants, but although one agreed, this did not materialize into an interview or period of observation.

Discussion

Overall, my field access arrangements to this government organization took over a year to reach a peak in which I was observing work-focused interviews although I believe that I did not reach "full microaccess" in this research project. My access within government organizations took place in four phases. First, macro, where institutional agreement was provided at the most senior level, in this case by a national director. Second, mesoaccess, where access was approved by more junior managers, each with responsibility for a single office. Third, access was then provided at the microlevel by individual advisors on the ground. I further divide this third phase into "very limited micro," where participants consented to take part in semistructured interviews; and "limited micro," where an individual advisor consented to be shadowed and further ethnographic observations were undertaken from the waiting field. The final access phase, which I have termed "full micro," where ethnographic observation was able to occur in a wide range of settings within the organization, did not occur in this study. The primary challenge in securing macrolevel permission was a lack of visibility caused by my relatively low status.

In order to move between phases, significant impression management was necessary (Delamont, 2002; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), and this included navigating insider and "outsider" status and ensuring I was viewed as nonthreatening but credible at each stage. Although I was not an insider for the purposes of the organization (Kanuha, 2000), I attempted to secure insider status through different strategies between the macro- and microphases. In the macrophase, I used my social capital as an early career academic, who was well-connected to influential academics, well read, and professional, in order to generate credibility. Gender and ethnicity did not feel important to me here, but this may have been related to my relative privilege as a White woman. Moreover, professional language and conventions in communication felt important, and this may have implications for nonnative students and researchers. In the early period in the microphase before access to shadow an advisor was granted, I was able to use alternative sources of social capital; I was a native White woman from a working class background who was a "student" and was happy and comfortable engaging in off topic conversations (Mannay, 2011), which reduced the perceived differences between myself and the participants.

Despite having some elements of insider status, my outsider status was relevant at all stages of access negotiations; I did not have a shared relationship with the organization which facilitated access. Had I been an insider, I believe that I would have been viewed with less suspicion, and been provided with access much more easily (Bengry-Howell & Griffin, 2011). This is particularly relevant because of the high level of political and media attention on the issue of incapacity benefits at the time of the research. Accordingly, the use of my supervisor, someone with high levels of social capital within the organization, as a gatekeeper was invaluable. Without this assistance, I believe that I would not have gained macroaccess, and if I used the informal microaccess route that I was offered, my research would have been vulnerable to requests for all data to be destroyed if senior managers retrospectively withdrew organizational consent. If I had been viewed as an insider, this may have facilitated access, but resulted in a range of alternative challenges. For example, a shared identity may have reduced the detailed accounts provided to me during interviews and ethnographic shadowing, as it would have been easy to assume a shared knowledge (Ledger, 2010).

Often, consent in research is considered as a one-off task, to be undertaken at the beginning of the project. In this instance, however, it was clear that consent was negotiated on an ongoing basis, with the majority of advisors not facilitating observation of their day-to-day practice, despite inclusion in participant information sheets and consent forms. While securing access was challenging and time-consuming, during the period in which I did not have agreement to shadow advisors, useful insights were also gathered from interview data and the waiting field, including the way in which claimants were routinely treated by security guards, and observation conducted from waiting areas and staff rooms (Mannay & Morgan, 2014). Unlike Garg (2008), I did not seek permission to use this content as data, as I had already secured access from the most senior levels, and all data were fully anonymized.

The role of emotion work within qualitative work is of interest. During the access negotiations, the main challenge was to remain patient when progress was very slow. However, considerable emotion work was required during one interview, where an advisor reported that they engaged in practices that I felt uncomfortable with (see Grant, in press for more details). This required considerable reflection when I left the field, as I felt that in appearing to be empathetic to the advisor's anti-claimant rhetoric, I had reinforced its legitimacy (Blee, 1998). I felt concerned that this may have an effect on the way in which the advisor treated claimants in the long term, which was at odds with my own position as sympathetic and empathetic to the multiple labor market disadvantage suffered by claimants (Grant, 2012). Alongside this, this advisor became a gatekeeper, facilitating access to the single advisor who allowed ethnographic shadowing, highlighting the need to pursue all possible avenues for access when microaccess is

challenging. By contrast, I was also mindful of the additional work undertaken by the advisor I shadowed. In this instance, I had to balance my own competing needs for a reasonable quantity of data alongside an empathetic understanding that I was placing an additional burden on the participant.

Considering the impact of access relations on the data collected, in terms of answering the research questions, my account of the field is very much partial, a social construction. I never did truly "get in" to the research site in the way that was hoped (Molloy, 2015). However, the restricted access is in itself illuminating (Bondy, 2013; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) of the tension between claimants as disabled and deserving or scroungers and undeserving (Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, 2005). The advisor who allowed shadowing appeared to subscribe to the view that claimants were disabled and thus they deserved as much support as she could give, unless they proved otherwise (Grant, 2013b). It is not possible to empirically *know* if the other advisors, who used language associated with scrounging discourses in their interviews at least some of the time, would have behaved differently. That said, limited practical support for the research project at organizational (macro and meso) level combined with very restricted access to shadowing of advisors during the microphase provides context on the organizations priorities and concerns at the time of the research (Coffey, 1999; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). It may be that whichever behaviors were displayed—harsh or lenient—the advisors would have faced criticism should the research have been described in the mainstream press (Katz, 1987).

Alongside this work package, interviews were conducted with incapacity benefit claimants. These findings provided a different answer to the research questions, particularly from participants accessed through a charity providing advice to claimants. In general, these highlighted a strong sense that the compulsory "support" from the Jobcentre Plus was unhelpful and upsetting, particularly as claimants felt that they needed to participate or would face benefit sanctions (Grant, 2011b). That said, access to this field was also restricted; some claimants would not talk to me even to find out what the research was about, and the staff at the charity who acted as gatekeepers, often reported this as being afraid that I had a link to "the Jobcentre" when they declined to participate. Again, this highlighted the contested status of being an incapacity benefit claimant in a time of negative political and media rhetoric (Dean, 1999; Katz, 1987), with calls for something to be done to reduce claimant numbers (Cohen, 2002), the claimants had a very real reason to fear participation. My status as someone who was not claiming benefits (an outsider) affected access relationships, despite my empathetic position toward the limited employment opportunities available for claimants.

Conclusion

Overall challenges which occurred in all three phases, but particularly in the macro- and mesophases, were focused on the researchers' status an outsider to the organization, which resulted in limited capital within the organization. Challenges in the microstage were also related to securing agreement for observational work to occur, while semistructured interviews were agreed to. This highlights the greater potential risk to participants within organizations from observation over a period of many hours, compared to a single interview. A range of challenges, and potential strategies to manage these, are presented in this article, but it is likely that additional challenges would be found in studies outside of organizations. The challenges in my research were partially resolved through the use of gatekeepers and high levels of impression management, to ensure that I was viewed as nonthreatening and nonjudgmental.

In research, particularly with hard to reach groups or organizations, access to the ethnographic field is a core element of contextual information. Power relationships between the researcher and the researched are often considered in relation to researcher privilege and power. However, this is not always the case at the macrolevel, where powerful elites are to be found. As a result, it may be that in some circumstances, challenges of gaining access to an organizations tell more than the data gathered itself. Therefore, access negotiations and encounters should be reported in empirical accounts, including their likely meanings for research findings that are constrained by the access arrangements (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The framework outlined which considers access in three phases—macro, meso, and micro—provides a way in which others may consider where their access challenges lie, and a framework for reporting these.

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